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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1895
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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0024
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0489
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0300
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0021
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0177
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2307
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1692
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000024

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SUBJECT: BUS COLLISION AND MUFTI ALLEGATIONS TOP KYRGYZ
MUSLIM COMMUNITY NEWS

REF: 06 BISHKEK 1759

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Classified By: DCM Lee Litzenberger, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

11. (C) Summary: A tragic bus accident, which claimed the lives of twenty-two Kyrgyz Hajj pilgrims in Saudi Arabia, clouded the conclusion of what many Kyrgyz had considered to be a successful year for the Hajj. Kyrgyz Muftiate and State Agency for Religious Affairs representatives consoled relatives with news that the crash victims would be proclaimed martyrs and subsequently buried in Saudi Arabia. The improvement in the Hajj experience for most Kyrgyz this year has not relieved pressure on Kyrgyzstan's chief mufti, Maratali-Adji Jumanov. Jumanov remains under fire with allegations of bribery, character attacks, criticism of his religious rulings and questions regarding his qualifications to govern Kyrgyzstan's Islamic community. The Muftiate's press secretary claimed that bribery allegations were conjured up in an attempt to remove Jumanov from office. Speculation connecting the Mufti's critics with Presidential Advisor Usen Sydykov has not been confirmed. End summary.

TRAGEDY WITH A SILVER LINING

12. (U) On January 14, twenty-two Kyrgyz pilgrims traveling by bus lost their lives in Saudi Arabia in an accident blamed on fog. Media reports stated that senior Kyrgyz clerics and Saudi authorities proclaimed the pilgrims "shahids" (martyrs) who, having died during the fulfillment of a religious commandment, are ensured a place in Paradise, a great honor for any Muslim. Representatives of the Kyrgyz Muftiate and State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA) met with relatives of the deceased to express their condolences. The relatives agreed that the deceased should be buried in Saudi Arabia, a

mark of distinction for Kyrgyz Muslims.

CAUGHT ON TAPE

13. (SBU) Despite generally favorable media coverage of this year's Hajj and the Mufti's handling of the Hajj arrangements, representatives of the Committee of Public Revolution and Youth Policy lambasted Chief Mufti Jumanov and called for his resignation during a January 11 press conference. Committee members displayed, but did not play, audio cassettes which allegedly contained recordings of the Mufti bribing two Jalalabad region Muslim clerics. These same two clerics, known critics of Jumanov, have led rallies denouncing the Mufti and demanding his resignation. As justification for the Mufti's resignation, the Committee representatives cited his "corrupt" activities, insufficient knowledge of the Koran and poor Arabic language skills.

THE MUFTI'S REBUTTAL

14. (C) Muftiate press secretary Assan Saipov admitted the existence of the tapes, but argued that the context of the conversation had been misconstrued. Saipov claimed that the clerics had approached Jumanov to request assistance for transportation back to Jalalabad, and nothing more. Saipov defended his superior and denounced the accusers' charges as nothing more than a smear campaign. During a side conversation with poloff, Saipov speculated that former Mufti Sadykjan Kamalov, current chairman of the International Center of Islamic Cooperation and brother to slain Imam Muhammadrafiq Kamalov, was somehow "behind these baseless allegations." The Mufti has since filed a slander suit against several individuals who have accused him of

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participation in corrupt activities.

YET ANOTHER GRIEVANCE

15. (SBU) In late December, demonstrators gathered outside the Muftiate office in Bishkek and elsewhere throughout the country to voice objections to the Mufti's decision to celebrate Eid on December 31. Eid Al-Adha, "the Festival of Sacrifice," marks the end of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Critics demanded that the celebration begin on December 30, the date observed in Saudi Arabia, as opposed to the date Jumanov and many other foreign clerics selected.

COMMENT

16. (C) Chief Mufti Jumanov clearly has numerous opponents. Many commentators speculate that Presidential Advisor Uden Sydykov is behind these critics. However, little evidence supports rumors that Sydykov desires to gain definitive control of the Muftiate and, correspondingly, the Islamic community. Jumanov has limited his political activity to rare comments backing President Bakiyev, but also avoids criticism of the opposition parties. If Sydykov is behind the critics, he may be searching for a more pliant cleric willing to praise President Bakiyev more openly and speak out against Bakiyev's opponents.

YOVANOVITCH